

STANDARD EXAMINER OP-ED SUBMISSION

There's no question that I-15 in Weber County is in dire need of reconstruction, especially from 31st Street north. Ninety percent of Weber County residents support the idea, and the majority considers traffic congestion to be a top concern with growth and development in the area (according to a Dan Jones phone survey conducted in Weber County in April 2005).

Few residents, however, are aware that the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) has been fully engaged in advancing the project since *before* the 2002 Winter Olympic Games, beating the expectation that areas outside of Salt Lake County would only be attended to *after* the Games.

Most people don't realize that before the orange barrels roll out onto the highway, years of tedious groundwork must take place. This groundwork can vary in length of time from project to project. Many people have such busy lives that taking the initiative to see, understand and become involved in the preliminary stages of highway projects can prove difficult. Therefore, it may erroneously seem to some that we, or other state agencies and officials, have placed the Weber County I-15 project on a back burner and that there is no timeline or firm commitment in place for the work to be done.

To the contrary, at the Utah Transportation Commission meeting in St. George on March 11, 2005, the Weber County project was discussed as one of the four most congested areas of the state in need of immediate attention. Furthermore, on April 26, 2005, I met with key Ogden City and Weber County civic and business leaders to announce the project's current funding status, construction timeline and other specifics. Ironically, a *Standard Examiner* editorial ran just days later on May 1, stating that "nobody at the Utah Department of Transportation even has a guess as to when that work may be done."

We have worked diligently on a continual basis for the last several years to deliver a freeway through Weber County that is safer, less congested, capable of handling future traffic volumes, and free of any deficiencies structurally, aesthetically or otherwise. Specific project outcomes will include adding additional lanes in each direction, widening shoulders and upgrading safety features to current safety standards; improving interchanges at 31st Street, 24th Street, 21st Street and 12th Street; adding Intelligent Transportation System elements to better monitor traffic flow; improving aesthetics and adding noise walls as desired by the surrounding communities.

Two mandatory prerequisites for getting the orange barrels rolling are 1) gaining federal approval and 2) obtaining funds from the proper sources.

The process for gaining federal approval usually takes the form of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). In most parts of the country, an EIS can take five to seven years to complete. (An EIS, by the way, is a detailed analysis of the potential impact of a project on its local environment).

We started the I-15 Weber County EIS in 2001 and received the requisite go-ahead of the Federal Highway Administration just three years later. Approval was achieved so quickly, in part, because the need for the project is so apparent.

We were then able to secure the allocation of Centennial Highway Funds from the state legislature this last January. Even when funds have been promised, they still must be allocated. The difference between “promised” and “allocated” is not unlike the difference between your brother writing you a check and that check actually clearing the bank.

We have christened the project as the “I-15 New Ogden Weber Expansion” but will refer to it in an abbreviated version – “I-15 NOW” to convey the urgency of the project and commitment to accomplishing the work as quickly as possible.

We expect to select a contractor, award the contract and issue the notice to proceed to the constructor by this November. The type of contract – Design-Build – will allow contractors to begin preliminary construction while final details are still being planned, which means the project will be completed much more quickly than if all details had to be finalized before the first barrel is placed (basically, taxpayers get more bang for the buck with a Design-Build contract). I-15 NOW is expected to begin next spring, with completion by Fall 2008.

Furthermore, with many UDOT workers living in and commuting from Weber County, we are acutely aware of what information our fellow residents in this area will be wanting during I-15 NOW construction. We are committed to a public information campaign that will increase awareness of what’s going on and help the public find ways to change travel patterns, use alternate routes, and find other ways to deal with construction.

Reconstruction of I-15 in Weber county has been a UDOT priority for many years and is urgently needed. We are excited by the ongoing advancement of the project and are continuing to make preparations that bring us closer to the start of construction. I-15 NOW is funded and is moving forward. We are committed to continually improving the public information process, so that there will be no need for any citizen to wonder if and when a critical project might take place, or how he or she will be affected.

Sincerely,

Brent DeYoung
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Utah Department of Transportation